

Advent 2010



On behalf of the Gardner-Webb University family, it is a pleasure to present the 2010 Advent Devotional Book.

For the past several years this book has been a special blessing to many people as a daily devotional during the season of Advent. It was begun and originally edited by the late Dr. Dan Goodman. Dan was a great teacher and scholar. He had a lasting and wonderful influence on his students, his colleagues and friends, and all who knew him. He is sorely missed. The Advent Book and the blessing it provides to so many will serve as a lasting tribute to Dr. Goodman.

We are grateful to Dr. Perry Hildreth, Dr. Sheri Adams and Dr. Danny West for continuing Dr. Goodman's work in editing the 2010 edition.

Please accept the 2010 Advent Devotional Book as a gift from the Gardner-Webb University family. It is our prayer that it will be a special blessing to you as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "A. Frank Bonner". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

A. Frank Bonner

The season of Advent is in many ways an extended metaphor for the whole of the Christian experience. It reflects the biblical images of longing and anticipation that are prominent in Old Testament theology. It is the collective ache of humanity for holy things – God things. Thus, the image of darkness is a controlling motif for those who wait in the shadows for the activity of God. We dare not forget that darkness even during these holy days of Advent.

Indeed, for many all of the season collapses into a month long celebration of the birth of Christ, but Advent demands oh so much more from us than that. It requires holy reflection, appropriate longing, and meaningful confession that then lead to joyous celebration. But the joy only comes on the heels of the longing. That is why the theme for this year's Advent guide is "Light." Light, however, can only fully be known in relationship to the darkness. The two share an uneasy connection but the one needs the other to be fully appreciated. Therefore, Advent is about the holy journey from the shadows of darkness to the splendor of light.

The inimitable Frederick Buechner captures the essence of Advent with these words: "The house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop as they wait in the darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised his baton. . . the extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just

before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment."

These reflections attempt to create holy moments for us all as together we wait and hope for the promised joy of God. Many thanks are due to those who have graciously agreed to share in this Advent journey. They represent a collective gathering of persons who are affiliated with Gardner-Webb University. We share much in common in that we love our school and we love the mystery and power that the season of Advent invites. Profound gratitude goes to my esteemed colleagues, Dr. Perry Hildreth and Dr. Sheri Adams. Their graciousness, commitment, and collaboration were essential to the overall success of this work. They are wonderful friends and co-Advent laborers! Likewise, the University administration has offered full support and blessing to this endeavor. Clearly, a work of this magnitude could not be completed without their help.

Most importantly, we offer this devotional guide in honor of all who will share its pages and thoughts, to the honor and the glory of our God, as revealed in this holy season, through the person of Jesus Christ our Lord. The baton is raised. . . and together, with all of humanity, we hold our breath and we wait.

Soli Deo Gloria

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

ADVENT AT GARDNER-WEBB 2010

Dr. Danny M. West
Executive Director,
Doctor of Ministry Program
Associate Professor of
Preaching and Pastoral Studies
School of Divinity

HOPE

SUNDAY,
NOVEMBER 28

Dr. B. Andrew Roby
Minister of Music,
First Baptist Church
of Shelby, NC
Adjunct Faculty Member,
GWU School of Divinity

Psalms 146
Isaiah 1:1-9
2 Peter 3:1-10
Matthew 25:1-13

Time and time again, God's people brought disaster upon themselves. The Hebrew scriptures are brutally honest in that regard. With self-absorbed complacency and sheer arrogance, the people to whom the prophets spoke seemed bent on following paths that took them straight into harm's way. During one time of great distress, Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God, called people to think carefully about their plight:

Your country lies desolate,
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence invaders devour your land;
it is desolate as overthrown by foreigners.
And daughter Zion is left . . .
like a besieged city. (Isaiah 1:7-8)

Later, Isaiah would bring from God words of hope, as he spoke of the coming of a child who would be "God with us," Immanuel (7:14). Isaiah would go on to talk about darkness giving way to great light, heavy burdens lifted to be replaced with exultation and rejoicing. The most wondrous hopes of all peoples and all ages would be realized. But not yet. People with expectations, anticipations, dreams, and hopes for a better day were assured by the prophet that such a day would come, but the waiting, the enduring, the awful suffering and, yes, the incipient hoping would go on for quite some time.

In this season of Advent, we must exercise patience. The joyful moment when we will celebrate the "Christ event," the day of Immanuel, the Word

becoming flesh and living with us will come. But not yet. Before we can claim the joy of Christmas, we must make the Advent pilgrimage that God's people through the ages have traversed. If we are to understand more fully what Advent means, we must recall both the despair and the hope of the prophets. We will have to embrace the sorrow and suffering of our times just as the prophets did of theirs. In the realization that our world is not so different from that of Isaiah comes the dawning light of hope that God has not, even at this late date, given up on the world.

As we live through the days and nights of this Advent season, it will not be enough for us to point to the past as we prepare to celebrate the nativity of Jesus in Bethlehem some two millennia ago. Rather, we must know – for ourselves – the anticipation that Messiah will once again stand upon this earth, making right what is wrong, destroying what is evil, making whole that which is good. We must declare that the "day of the Lord will come like a thief," sudden and surprising (2 Peter 3:10). Jesus himself taught that we must be as the wise bridesmaids who stayed alert and prepared even when others were no longer vigilant (Matthew 25:1-13), and we must rise to the challenge of the African-American spiritual that exhorts: "Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. The Lord is drawing nigh." Remember this: the darker the world is, the brighter your lamp will appear to be as long as it keeps on burning!

Widows and orphans – and all the truly vulnerable among us – have a special place in God's Kingdom. How we treat these folk is the true test of the authenticity of our faith. It was true in Isaiah's day, and it is true in our own. It is easiest to read Isaiah's words as a judgment on ritualistic piety, and many do. This is a false choice since prayer and the proper worship of God are the duty of the person of faith. What the text reminds us of, however, is that worship is right only when it is accompanied by right living. And right living is best demonstrated in seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow.

I've known well several widows over the course of my life, and I have learned important lessons from them. My paternal grandmother's husband died when my father was a young boy. She was left to raise two children with no substantial income in a day when women did not usually work outside of the home. My aunt's husband also died leaving her with a young daughter to raise. In both cases, I've heard stories of the greatest examples of generosity and care by good people. Unfortunately, I've also heard stories that demonstrated how quickly and easily some supposedly religious people will take advantage of those in positions of vulnerability. We know that this behavior is not right.

How much bigger does God have to write this lesson to us than in coming to us as a small defenseless baby born to peasant parents who

were, themselves, members of an oppressed minority? The human family had a hard time recognizing God then. The question is, have we learned to recognize God when He comes among us now?

Most contemporary expectations about God's return include lots of fire and smoke and loud noise and violence. Maybe that's what it will all come to eventually – humanity being “devoured by the sword.” Maybe that's the only way God can finally bring justice and peace to the earth. That certainly was the majority view of the Hebrews under Roman oppression who anticipated the coming of God's Kingdom. It could be, however, that God's hope for us is continually expressed to us as He, even now, comes to us as He did in Bethlehem as one who is marginalized, destitute, and vulnerable.

The hope of Advent, God's hope for our world, is expressed in God's invitation for our hearts, scarlet with sin, to be made as white as snow. We prepare to graciously welcome and receive the Christ in whatever form he may come to us. Victor or victim. King or peasant. Widow and orphan.

HOPE

MONDAY,
NOVEMBER 29

Dr. T. Perry Hildreth
Associate Professor of
Philosophy
Department of Religious
Studies and Philosophy

Psalm 1
Isaiah 1:10-20
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Luke 20:1-8

HOPE

TUESDAY,
NOVEMBER 30

Mr. Matthew T. Lineberger
Undergraduate Student
Sacred Music and Music
Education Major

Psalm 5
Isaiah 1:21-31
1 Thessalonians 2:1-12
Luke 20:9-18

The parable of the vineyard is one of those parables I just don't get. I don't come away from it with a simple "The kingdom of God is..." statement. But, Jesus didn't spell it out for us like that; he wrapped up the Truth in a story – a story that is very unsettling. For instance, why do the vine-growers act the way they do? Who, in their right mind, murders their boss's "beloved son" and then expects to get the boss's inheritance? Regardless of their reasoning, the way they are living reveals their belief: the Owner is not a force to be reckoned with. He's gone "on a journey for a long time" (Luke 20:9).

Isaiah's prophecy is strikingly parallel to the Gospel parable: the righteous-city-turned-harlot is suffering the consequences of its own sin. Its "silver has become dross;" once the home of "righteousness," now its citizens murder and are completely without concern for the helpless among them.

The psalmist praises: "You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness" (Psalm 5:4). Those who choose to turn away from God choose self-destruction. But the psalmist concludes Psalm 5 with rejoicing – rejoicing in the shelter the LORD gives those who will look to God as their refuge in the time of trouble.

Paul and company know all about trouble. They've been evangelizing and have suffered persecution. They've endured their trials – I imagine them singing Psalm 5 along the way – and are able to live and preach the Gospel "amid much opposition" (1 Thessalonians 2:2). They stick to their calling, proclaiming the Gospel of God amongst the church in Thessalonica by kingdom-living and kingdom-

speaking. Their purpose: "so that [the Thessalonians] would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls [them] into His own kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:12).

Maybe Paul and company need to visit the vineyard in Jesus' parable, or the harlot-city described in Isaiah.

Or maybe they need to visit us.

Too often I share in the sinful attitude of those vine-growers: forgetfulness – or willful ignorance – of the Owner of the vineyard. Too often my silver turns to dross; I grow oblivious to the cry of the helpless and to the still, small voice of God's Spirit. Too often my walk is far from worthy of the God who calls me. What about you?

During Advent, we are invited to realize the darkness of our slavery to sin, but also to hear prophecies of the way things should, and will, be: "Zion will be redeemed with justice and her repentant ones with righteousness" (Isaiah 1:27).

God, make us repentant, redeem us, and make us to walk in the Way worthy of You. Sing with your Spirit a song of rejoicing in our hearts, and shelter us even as You are consuming our sinfulness with holy fire. Remind us that You will come back after Your long journey, and give us the Hope we have in our Christ: Jesus, by whose suffering all bad is made good, and all wrongs, right. Through Him we pray, Amen.

While I was a student in the Divinity School at Gardner-Webb University, I believed that I was preparing myself for ministry. I dove into classes like Hebrew 3: Genesis Exegesis, Pauline Theology, and Administration and Leadership in the Church. I had conversations with friends and colleagues about the changing faces of Baptists and the belief in a provident God. I wore the hats of youth minister and worship leader, was given my Master's hood, and walked across the stage to receive my diploma. And after those three years passed quickly, I found myself in full-time vocational ministry.

My husband is a traditionalist when it comes to the season of Advent. He will not think about the manger and swaddling clothes until Christmas Day. He refuses to sing "Joy to the World" until December 25th. I grew up very differently. My family did our Christmas shopping the day after Thanksgiving, and began giving out small gifts shortly thereafter... mainly because we couldn't wait until the end of December.

In those first few months after Divinity School, as I was wading up to my ears in the reality of ministry, I asked my husband to go ahead and put up the Christmas tree. He reminded me that it was not even time for Halloween, and we had to wait. I was in need of the hope of the season. I just knew that the brightness of the lights would ease the grim truth of the lives around me, tangled in darkness.

In Paul's writing to the church at Thessalonica, he mentions this idea of hope. It is central to Paul's theology: hope is about what God has given believers in Christ. Even in the midst of suffering, both his and theirs, is a hope that consists of faith in God, endurance, and confident waiting for God's future.

Thanks be to God that it is not just the lights on the tree that give us hope for the future! Just as Paul longed to see his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica, we long for the hope of God With Us. It is the anticipation in hope that God will break into our messy lives again, with the birth of the Christ Child. This season, might we each find the space to hope and wait for that glory and joy!

HOPE

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 1

Rev. Jennifer Janney
Associate Minister/Instructor
in Religion
Chowan University
Master of Divinity 2007
School of Divinity

Psalm 119:1-24
Isaiah 2:1-11
1 Thessalonians 2:13-20
Luke 20: 19-26

HOPE

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 2

Dr. Kent Blevins
Chair, Department of Religious
Studies and Philosophy
Professor of Religious Studies

Psalms 18:1-20
Isaiah 2:12-22
1 Thessalonians 3:1-13
Luke 20:27-40

When my children were small and I wanted their undivided attention, I would begin by asking, "Do you have your ears turned on?" As though their ears were on/off knobs, I would pretend to twist and turn them as I checked to make sure their eyes and ears were directed toward me.

Much more than a "how-to-do" skill, listening is also a "how-to-be" skill. More than a matter of proper technique, true listening is a response grounded in love. When we listen, we say to another, "You matter. You carry truth that I would like to discover. I want to be open to receiving that truth."

In the text for our meditation today, some Sadducees approach Jesus with a question. But they aren't really interested in listening to his answer. The passage in Luke 20 is set in the midst of a series of stories about challenges faced by Jesus from the "chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people" (Luke 19:47). Luke informs us that they "kept looking for a way to kill him." They were not interested in seeking truth. Their hearts were not open for learning. Their intent was to harm.

Jesus, of course, comes off well in the debate with the Sadducees. Some even give him grudging praise: "Teacher, you have spoken well" (v. 39). But I doubt Jesus felt good about winning debate points in such encounters. The Sadducees missed an opportunity to respond to God's love. A chance to receive a word of hope slipped away. The attention of the Sadducees was so focused on trying to catch Jesus in

a misstep that could be used to harm him that a great truth was not heard: God "is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive" (20:38).

Often our own ears are not "turned on" to hear God's voice. Often the cause is our lack of openness toward others. Our society is becoming more polarized. An "us vs. them" mentality reigns and often seeps into the life of our churches. Fear and prejudice often cloud our opinions and judgments. We, like the Sadducees and scribes, can have attitudes that prevent us from hearing God's hopeful word.

Openness to the truth carried by others (especially those we fear or dislike) may soften our hearts and make us different persons. "Turning our ears on" will mean refusing to regard another as enemy (as our culture teaches us to do), but rather as a potential truth-bearer. In the end, "turning our ears on" toward God cannot be separated from our willingness to "turn our ears on" toward others.

Advent is a season of hope, and one part of the hopeful message is that our ears really can be "turned on." Reflection on the coming of the Christ child can help us hear the message of hope that God ceaselessly offers to us from directions we might least expect. How many recognized, after all, that hope came in the form of a baby lying in a lowly manger?

Advent: coming, arrival

Refuge: shelter or protection: a sheltered or protected state safe from something threatening, harmful, or unpleasant

Hope: To wish for something with expectation of its fulfillment, to look forward to with confidence or expectation. The theological virtue defined as the desire and search for a future good, difficult but not impossible to attain with God's help.

As I was reading the passages for this day, Psalm 16:1 stuck out to me – “Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge.” Maybe it was because of Hurricane Earl churning along the coast of Cape Hatteras, but the word “refuge” hit home with me.

With the arrival of a hurricane, there are many preparations that need to take place. I lived for 3 years one block from the ocean. I experienced a couple of hurricanes and nor'easters and know that you prepare as much as you can, anticipate what can happen and wait with expectation as the storm moves toward land. Your hope as you evacuate is that your home will still be standing with minimal damage when you return.

I wasn't so fortunate during Hurricane Floyd. When I returned to the island after the storm, I saw the destruction. Ocean front houses had disappeared. There were piles of sand on both sides of the make shift road. As I pulled up to my apartment, my landlord and his family were busy pulling my belongings out of the house. Everything was ruined. My apartment had a water line of 2 feet

on the wall. Everything was wet and beginning to mildew. All of my possessions to this point in my life were laying out in the yard for all to see. I felt exposed, humbled and scared. Starting fresh was not something I wanted to do. Where would I live? What about my furniture? There was such a sense of despair. It is at this time that you take inventory of what is important in your life.

On the flipside, there is something beautiful about a hurricane, the beauty of the winds, the awe of its magnitude. It creates a sense of community among a group of people. A hurricane, whether it has hit land or dwindled down to a tropical storm, gives people a chance for a fresh start. And after every hurricane that I have faced, the most beautiful shells wash up along the beach. There are also sunsets that words cannot describe.

It is sad to think that it takes destruction to bring you to hope. It takes darkness to bring you to light. It takes a baby to bring you to the cross. Advent is marked by the spirit of expectation, of anticipation and of preparation. Take time today to let your heart be exposed and humbled. Use this day and these passages listed to take inventory of your Christian life. Don't wait for the hurricane of the Christmas season to make landfall in your life. Take the quietness of the day to make preparations for the arrival of the King of Kings. Take refuge in the hope of the baby in the manger.

HOPE

FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 3

Ms. Karissa Wei
Director of Student Activities
Campus Recreation and
Orientation

Psalm 16
Isaiah 3:8-15
1 Thessalonians 4:1-12
Luke 20:41-21:4

HOPE

SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 4

Dr. Ron Williams
Professor of Religious Studies
Department of Religious
Studies and Philosophy

Psalm 20
Isaiah 41:2-6
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Luke 21: 5-19

“WYSIWYG” (pronounced whiskey) is recognizable to computer geeks and some computer users. It means, “what you see is what you get.” It suggests that what you see on the computer screen is what will be printed. This basic viewing fits for computers, but not necessarily for life. For the Christian, according to the Apostle Paul, what you see is NOT what you get!

With 1 Thessalonians, Paul was writing very possibly his first epistle. It was addressed to the young Christians in Thessalonica in northern Greece. They were anxious because in about 50 AD, 20 years after the angel’s announcement of Jesus’ return, their older members were dying and the survivors were left in a lurch, with looming questions: “What happens to those believers who die before Jesus returns? Is there any hope?” While Paul’s response has caused much debate, one fact is clear. Paul was offering hope. “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, NRSV)

December seven years ago brought shocking news. My mother had cancer, inoperable metastatic lesions on the brain, and lung cancer after a lifetime of smoking. This began a four-month process of care giving and waiting. As we watched the physical decline we observed hope. My mother had made a life-changing decision as

a young adult to be a follower of Jesus. During my early years in church, my mother was my Sunday School and VBS teacher. As I began to try my own wings, she encouraged me to be what God was leading me to be. Now, in her last days, the impact of that personal commitment was evident as she faced the end of physical life. She had “hope” grounded in her relationship with Jesus Christ. The memorial service for her was marked by this hope as we celebrated life and continued life.

This word of hope is a clear part of the Christian message. While we may debate whether this passage is to be interpreted literally or figuratively, we must not miss the clear message ringing from the text. “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (1 Thessalonians 4:18, NRSV) Paul was offering hope to these earliest Christians and, through scripture, offers hope to all believers. What we see is not all there is! The anticipation of Christ’s return brings hope to believers. To answer the Thessalonians, “Yes, in Christ there is hope!”

When I was a student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary many years ago, I earned my living by working on the staff of the Men's Mission on Camp Street. It was a mission for down and out men, homeless men, in the city. While I was there, the decision was made to refurbish the upper floor and provide a place for homeless women as well.

One of our first clients was a young woman who had escaped an abusive husband. She had traveled by bus with her two very young children from her home in Arizona to New Orleans, certain that he would never search for her there. When she arrived, her face was still black and blue from the latest beating.

She wanted to go right to work building a new life for herself and her children, so I was involved in helping her find work and transportation to work and in caring for her children while she worked. In a short time, she was saving money toward renting an apartment and getting a used car. All was well.

One weekend I went home and told my mom the story. My mom shared the story with her Sunday School class. Someone in the class said, "I want to help her." I left for New Orleans later that day with \$450.00 for my client and friend. I will never forget the hesitancy on the young woman's part when I showed her the money and told her the story. "Who gave me this money?" she asked, followed by, "Why would they do that?"

No do-gooder ever felt better about doing good than this do-gooder did after that encounter, but the other shoe had not dropped! When I arrived at work the next day, I learned she had bought plane tickets for herself and the kids and gone back to Arizona. I could have written a wild grapes parable myself that day. For a long time, I felt anger, disappointment, even betrayal, when I thought about the event.

In time, though, I began to think differently about it. I realized it wasn't a given that she had returned to an abusive marriage. She had gained strength and confidence on her own, and she knew she could take care of herself and her children if she had to. More importantly, I realized that she had taken money given by some of God's people because they cared, and that she, not I, was responsible for the outcome. Finally I came to a deep sense of peace about giving and helping in God's name. I am asked only to give and to help as I feel led by God's spirit. I can let the rest go.

PEACE

SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 5

Dr. Sheri Adams
Professor of Theology and
Christian History
School of Divinity

Psalm 148
Isaiah 54:4-7
2 Peter 3:11-18
Luke 7:28-35

PEACE

MONDAY,
DECEMBER 6

Ms. Selvia Brown
Administrative Assistant
School of Divinity

Psalm 25
Isaiah 5:8-12, 18-23
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Luke 21:20-28

The psalmist presents a portrait of a peace-seeking, humble man in the twenty-fifth chapter. My grandfather was such a man. "He guides the humble in what is right, and teaches them his way" (vs. 9). Papa Beam was short in stature, but long on personal core values. I never met this wee little man, but have heard tales, now passed down through the family. This wise man did not always choose the easy, well-traveled road, but instead was guided by his strong sense of integrity.

His eldest child was brutally attacked by a neighbor. He must have anguished over his course of action. Should he seek revenge? If so, it could have created an even larger battle in the community. Should he overcome his initial hurt and anger and forgive his neighbor? Should he turn the other cheek, express this forgiveness, accept his decision, and live peacefully with his decision? What a dilemma! John Greenleaf Whittier said, "Peace hath higher test of manhood... Than battle ever knew!" What a test! I can only imagine how terribly trying this decision must have been. He did choose to go to the neighbor and forgive him. What a portrait of grace!

We moved "back home" to the family farm last summer. Oh, how very beautiful it is in the country overlooking the South Mountains. Psalm 25:13 tells us "... and his descendants will inherit the land." I often wonder what would have happened had Papa Beam taken another avenue.

Thank you Papa Beam for being a Man of Peace.

All of us have felt wronged at times, even to the point of harboring animosities much too long. Do we follow the example of The Prince of Peace? Do we take personal risks to ensure peace?

Only when we love our brothers as ourselves can we know the true blessings of peace. Let us be a blessing to others in this season of Advent, just as we have been so very blessed throughout the year.

Have you ever been lost in a strange city? Do you remember the feeling? You are a little disoriented. You lose your sense of direction. You know where you are supposed to be but you are not really there. My youngest daughter, Rebekah, and I journey together each summer for 3 or 4 days to various places around the country watching baseball. Mostly we watch minor league baseball but occasionally we will catch a major league game. We have been as far as St. Louis to the west, Vero Beach to the south, and Birmingham in Alabama. Baseball is the means. The point is being together. In the summer of 2010 we searched for a Barnes and Noble bookstore in Birmingham that had been relocated. I said to Rebekah, "I think we are lost," to which she responded, "We can't be lost, we're together in Birmingham, Alabama."

The people of God were threatened with exile. Exile is being away from home. Exile is that which can cause us to become a bit disoriented. Exile can cause us to lose our sense of direction. Exile is a certain form of feeling lost. Yet, with all of that comes a loss of peace. With the coming of Christ comes the possibility of being found. With the coming of Christ comes a reorientation. With the coming of Christ comes the regaining of our sense of direction.

Paul uses a beautiful phrase for God when he calls God the "God of all peace." Whatever circumstance renders us without a sense of direction, disoriented, or a feeling of being lost, we know that God is with us even in exile. That is what the people of God ultimately learned. Though we may feel lost, in Jesus Christ, "we can't be lost, we're together with God."

As we prepare for the coming of the "God of all peace" incarnate in Jesus Christ, let us welcome him as the One who gives us "all peace."

PEACE

TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 7

Rev. John Bridges
Director of Church Relations

Psalms 26
Isaiah 5:13-17, 24-25
1 Thessalonians 5:12-28
Luke 21:29-38

PEACE

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 8

Mr. Jesse Roberts
Undergraduate Student
Psychology Major

Psalm 38
Isaiah 6:1-13
2 Thessalonians 1:1-12
John 7:53-8:11

There are many places in scripture that we see the Light of Christ vividly illustrated. One such illustration can be found in John 8. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees bring an adulterous woman before Jesus as he is teaching in the temple. When these individuals suggest to him that this woman be stoned, and ask for his input on the matter, he speaks words that they surely did not expect: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." In a place of darkness – a place of accusation – a place of hostility – Jesus creates light. This woman expected to be stoned to death by her accusers, yet Christ took the attention away from her sin, and gave everyone the opportunity to examine their own personal struggles and imperfections. He was Light in a time of total darkness for this woman. He gave her peace.

How has Christ demonstrated this Light in our lives?

Both of my parents passed away unexpectedly before I was 17 years old – my mother when I was 4 and my father when I was 16. After losing my father, I experienced a period of grief that was unlike any other – a period of darkness. But, it was in this period of total darkness that the Light of Christ became most evident to me. It was when I was alone that His love became more real to me than ever before. It was then that He gave me peace.

In our times of darkness, where do we turn? We have the ability to choose our path in the face of adversity and hardship. When we experience this darkness, we can turn to secular remedies such as alcohol and drugs to soothe our pain, or we can choose to seek the face of Christ and allow His light to pour into our lives, bringing us hope and peace.

John 8:12 – When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

During this Advent season and in the future, let us remember that Christ is the Light in our world of darkness.

Had God not given PEACE freely, by what other means could we attain it?

If PEACE had a monetary value, how much would it cost us?

Would governments place a tax on PEACE like everything else?

If only the rich could afford PEACE, would they share it with the poor?

Would nations go to war over PEACE and destroy each other for the sake of gaining it?

These are a few questions that we all would be asking if God allowed humanity to control the peace that he intended every soul possibly to experience in this life and to experience certainly in the life to come.

After considering these few questions that appear somewhat strange, yet not totally senseless, it gives me an abundant peace and ample satisfaction just in knowing that humanity is not in control of God's Peace. What about you? You do know there is a peace that surpasses all understanding, don't you?

This peace is able to reach as deep into the soul as sickness, suffering, sorrow, and separation can pierce or penetrate. This peace is able to do what drugs, alcohol, possessions, and every kind of sinful gratification of the flesh cannot achieve. How do I know? I know because over the course of a

half century of living I have experienced enough trials in my life to bring me to this conclusion.

Since I've been a believer, I've had some sick days but my peace has never left me. As a pastor I have suffered persecution from "church folk" (not Christians) but my peace remains full. The weight of sorrows has pressed me down in the death of my mother when I was only seven, then having to bury my father, my only brother, and worst of all, my only son, but my peace is still intact. Separation from these loved ones sometimes still causes my heart to grieve, but my peace has not forsaken me.

Now you're wondering, what does he know about drugs, alcohol, possessions, and sinful indulgence? Well, I experienced enough of those things as a former unbeliever to know that King Solomon was right, "It is all vanity."

Isn't God amazing? For over 2000 Advents, he has never once failed to remind fallen humanity that all the hope, the joy, the love, and the peace that we could ever hope for shall never be in danger of human dominance – never to be sold for millions of dollars, never to be taxed by world governments, never to be hoarded by the rich, never to be won by wars, but only attained through JESUS CHRIST our Lord. It is a joy to know that because Jesus came to us, we all can have God's Peace today, and his peace will be an eternal reality for us when he comes again!

PEACE

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 9

Rev. Roger W. Fuller
Pastor, Zion Hill Baptist Church
Master of Divinity 2010
School of Divinity

Psalms 37:1-18
Isaiah 7:1-9
2 Thessalonians 2:1-12
Luke 22:1-13

PEACE

FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 10

Dr. Don Caudill
Professor of Marketing
Godbold School of Business

Psalm 35
Isaiah 7:10-25
2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5
Luke 22:14-30

When I reflect on this week's theme – Peace (especially in the midst of horrific circumstances, calamities, difficulties and disasters), I am reminded of the example of Saint Germaine Cousin. During all of her 21 years of life, Germaine suffered both excruciating bodily pain and horrifying cruelty by her stepmother. Germaine's stepmother nearly starved her to death, required her to sleep in the barn, and forced her to take care of the sheep from sun up to sun down. Moreover, Germaine's stepmother made her spin wool all day and if the fixed amount of wool was not spun, Germaine's stepmother brutally punished her. One day, Germaine's stepmother chased her down the road because she thought Germaine had stolen some bread and was hiding it in her apron. When Germaine opened her apron, flowers from other parts of the world fell to the ground.

Despite inconceivable suffering, Germaine never complained and continuously focused on God's promise of peace. Although Germaine never received "relief" (God does not promise to take us out of our difficulties), she did enjoy peace. While Germaine spun wool and guarded the sheep, she would teach the village children about the goodness and love of God. Every morning, Germaine placed her staff in the ground and left the sheep, never losing one, to attend church. The village church was located on the other side of a small stream that after heavy rain would become treacherous to cross. But on many occasions,

villagers witnessed the raging waters separate and Germaine cross on dry land.

Today's scripture texts have a common theme: God has promised that if we look to Him instead of our circumstances His grace is sufficient to give us peace in the midst of all difficulties. In Psalm 35, David, though suffering incredible troubles, praised God and, in the end, God gave him peace. Any of the things David was enduring could have robbed him of this peace if he had looked at his circumstances.

Consider Germaine's prayer: "Dear God, please don't let me be too hungry or too thirsty. Help me to please my mother. And help me to please you." Despite the brutality of her stepmother and what must have been constant hunger, Germaine still prayed to "please her mother."

As we keep our thoughts on the Prince of Peace during this Advent season, may we not allow any circumstance or difficulty to rob us of God's Peace.

My Grandmother Johnson looked as if she stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting. She always had her hair in a bun, her apron on, and the cookie jar full of homemade tea cookies with colorful sprinkles. Grandma enjoyed life more than anyone I have ever known. She welcomed with enthusiasm each new adventure, whether it was riding in a helicopter, or wearing a bathing suit for the first time in her late seventies.

Life was not always easy for Grandma. She grew up in poverty and later worked long hours in the fields alongside my Grandfather to provide for their seven children. She buried her husband and a child and outlived all her relatives and close friends. Grandma had a simple, yet deep, and abiding faith which sustained her through difficult times. Grandma knew her refuge was Christ, and as a child I was often awakened in the mornings to the sound of her reading aloud from her Bible. In later years she would speak to me of the peace she had in Christ and her readiness and desire to go be with her Lord.

Grandma's health began deteriorating. By the time she entered her nineties she could no longer stay alone so family took turns caring for her. She still enjoyed being with her family, especially the little ones and she reveled in the birth of each new great-grandchild. My second child, Lauren, was born on Christmas Day and Grandma was thrilled to have a Christmas baby in the family. Never mind that people said it would complicate birthday

celebrations. According to Grandma, a Christmas baby was a special gift.

One evening the following June, Grandma told my mother of her wish to "see my baby one more time." The next morning Grandma became unresponsive and hospice was called. As family gathered around, she remained unresponsive until the fourth day when she suddenly opened her eyes. As we rushed to her bedside, someone picked up Lauren who was asleep on a pallet in the corner of the room and held her up for Grandma to see. Grandma began talking to Lauren and smiling that wonderful Grandma smile of hers. She showered the baby with kisses and laughed as Lauren put on a show, waving her arms, smiling, and reaching out for Grandma. For two or three wonderful, precious minutes Grandma got to see her Christmas baby one more time. Then she closed her eyes once again.

Our family received a wonderful gift that day. We knew God had granted Grandma, His good and faithful servant, a final earthly blessing and gave assurance in her final days that He was in control. That was indeed her peace and refuge. Three days later Grandma passed away. We were comforted knowing the next time she opened her eyes would be as she entered into her heavenly home to be welcomed there by the true Child of Christmas.

PEACE

SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 11

Ms. Cheryll J. Potter
Director
Noel Program for Students
with Disabilities

Psalms 30
Isaiah 8:1-15
2 Thessalonians 3:6-18
Luke 22:31-38

Joy

SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 12

Dr. Danny M. West
Executive Director,
Doctor of Ministry Program
Associate Professor of
Preaching and Pastoral Studies
School of Divinity

Psalms 63:1-8
Isaiah 13:6-13
Hebrews 12:18-29
John 3:22-30

The ways of God are curious indeed! Take a gander at the Kingdom he is assembling and you will likely see that God chooses to use the most unusual and unlikely persons to accomplish his purposes. John the Baptist was such a person. Matthew describes him as a true desert wanderer: camel hair cloak, leather belt, a connoisseur of locust and wild honey. He was not the kind of fellow who would fit comfortably into polite society; no, his disposition was better suited to the ways of the wild. Yet, it was on the shoulders of this rough and rowdy first century desert wanderer that God placed the enormous burden and responsibility of announcing the coming of the promised Messiah.

Truth is, God has always used unconventional messengers to speak an unconventional message. A simple stroll through the pages of Holy Scripture will bear this truth out. There was Noah, building an ark in the middle of a desert. And there was Abraham, who when he should have been enjoying the rest home, is singing lullabies to young Isaac at night. The list goes on: Jeremiah, Mary, Elizabeth, Peter, and Paul. All were riddled with weakness and warts, foibles and flaws. It is an unlikely cast yet one upon which was placed enormous burden and responsibility.

There have been countless times in my service to the church when I've wondered aloud what God was up to. I've watched ministers, the walking wounded, attempt to do something for God and for others, and if truth be told, sometimes they, the wounded ones, were in worse shape than those to whom they offered ministry. Couldn't God find better? Aren't there more qualified and whole persons upon whom we can call? And then my humanity grips me into

remembering that I am choked full of imperfection and weakness myself. Were it not for the desert wanderer in all of us, God would have no one upon whom he could call.

One of the most remarkable things I ever witnessed was a moment in my youthful days as the student pastor of a full-time seminary church. There was, in this rural congregation, a young lady named Debby who was profoundly limited in both her physical and emotional capacity. Her humanity, however, was fully intact as she was one of the most loving and blessed souls I've ever known. One Sunday she knocked my life off balance, when at the end of our worship service, she came to the front of the church to speak with me. Ordinarily, it was very difficult to understand her speech but in that moment, she spoke with great clarity and calm. She said to me, "Danny, I know there is not much I can do for God, but I want to do my best for him." In that moment, I would have traded the whole congregation in for a church full of folks like Debby. Why? Because it was in that moment that I realized that God was using this remarkable young lady to teach me an important Kingdom lesson. The least likely in our midst was the very one used by God to wring holy truths out in our midst.

As it was with Debby, and John the Baptist, and a host of others, God chooses the least likely to advance his eternal causes. Advent typifies this holy notion. God turns our conventional wisdom upside down and, in so doing, we journey from the wilderness cries of John the Baptist, to the infant cries of Jesus in the manger. And it is good!

It was Christmas Eve, 1993. My firstborn son was five months old. I should have been celebrating life, enjoying the warmth of Christmas and delighting in our annual family traditions. Instead, my heart was broken. Bitter tears were once again leaving their familiar trail upon my face. As I stepped out of the hearse, the frigid wind felt like a harsh slap upon my skin. Thirteen inches of snow and ice blanketed the ground. Just as the cold began to grip my body, anger began to grip my heart.

The congregation stood in respect as we made our way down the chapel aisle. I couldn't bear to look at the stark-gray casket. In my spirit, I began to yell at God, "Why, God, Why? I still need my daddy! Why didn't you heal his cancer? He surrendered his life to you! How will my son ever know what a wonderful grandfather he would have been? Why now? Couldn't you at least have let him hold on for one more week? It's Christmas, God! We're supposed to be celebrating you! Well, I don't like you too much right now, and I certainly don't understand you. Joy to the world? Yeah, right!"

In that moment, God began to speak to my haughty spirit. His voice was so strong, that to me, it was almost audible. "Look, my precious child, LOOK! I want you to look at that casket! Yes, it is Christmas! If it weren't for the Christmas cradle, for the Calvary cross, you would be looking at this cold casket without a glimmer of hope! Your father

is not there, he is with me! And I did heal him, for eternity! Yes, my child, it is Christmas, the day I brought hope and joy to the world!"

We stood to sing "Victory in Jesus," the song my dad requested for this day. The congregation was full of pastors, and their deep male voices began to swell in such amazing harmony and thundering praise! To my amazement, I suddenly found myself in the midst of a deeply moving worship service. Never before had I simultaneously felt such extreme joy and such extreme pain. Never before had the words to that sweet hymn been so alive and so meaningful. And never before had I experienced such a true Christmas. "Oh yes, God! It is Christmas – JOY TO THE WORLD!"

I will never get over the pain of losing my dad, but I'm not supposed to. God uses such pain to mold us and commune with us. As deep as the pain, God will give us joy just as deep, if we turn the pain over to Him. The most beautiful music is born out of suffering, a lesson God taught me personally on that special Christmas. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King!"

"You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest." Isaiah 9:3

Joy

MONDAY,
DECEMBER 13

Ms. Cindy Clary
Admissions Counselor

Psalms 41
Isaiah 8:16-18
2 Peter 1:1-11
Luke 22:39-53

Joy

TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 14

Dr. C. Earl Leininger
Associate Provost for Arts
and Sciences

Psalm 45
Isaiah 9:1-7
2 Peter 1:12-21
Luke 22:54-69

"Have you ever thought of Christmas as Judgment Day?" I was hooked! It was the third Sunday in Advent, my senior year in college, and I was driving from morning worship at the Baptist church in Oklahoma City, where I served as part-time youth director and general flunky, to the home of the elderly church members who kindly provided me a bed and a home-cooked meal on weekends. The voice on the radio, I learned later, belonged to Dr. Edmund Steinle, Professor of Homiletics at Union Seminary, New York, and preacher of the day for "The Protestant Hour."

The point of his sermon, still vivid in my mind after more than 50 years, was that we like to think of the Day that lies at the end of our Advent pilgrimage in terms of the faint streaks of dawn moving across the sky, reminding us that God comes into our lives like daybreak, full of promise and hope. And that is, of course, true. But while I sat mesmerized by his voice and his words, he confronted me with the flipside of that truth: the Light that arrives at the conclusion of our "journey to Bethlehem" not only banishes the shadows and the darkness, it also probes and searches out the secret places of our hearts. It was not the last time I would confront that paradox – the Light that warms and comforts is also the Light that reveals and judges – but it was the first time. It was a sobering idea to take into a heart and mind barely at the outer edges of adolescence angst, and it could have cast a pall over the traditional joy of the season. But in the providence of life's surprises, it became instead the embryo of a

life-long fascination and struggle with the polar tension between justice and mercy, grace and responsibility.

As I read the scripture passages for our reflection today, with all the references to light and shadow, that "Aha moment" of a half-century ago came back in a flood of memory. The Promised One of Isaiah is likened to a "great light" shining in "a land of deep darkness." He is the Prince of Peace, yes, but he also comes to establish "justice and righteousness." The writer of the epistle we know as Second Peter likens the prophetic words about the Christ to the morning star, to the dawning of the day, and to "a lamp shining in a dark place." And Luke pictures the apostle Peter himself trying, before the crucifixion, to hide in the shadows but finding no refuge, for the fire that warms him casts the light that exposes him.

We love to emerge from Advent into candlelight services where we adore the innocent Christ-child in shadowed mystery. And so we should. But we also must know that the light of the child of Bethlehem that blesses us also exposes the hidden depths of our hearts – and we need both. Physically, emotionally, or spiritually, without openness there can be no healing; and without healing there can be no joy. If we welcome the Light in all its splendor, we can say with the Psalmist, "My heart overflows with a goodly theme."

Maybe you've heard of the reenactors? As a hobby, they refight old battles especially from our Civil War. They neither kill nor wound, but they place a high value on authenticity in things like uniforms and what to eat for breakfast before the battle. I believe there are some of them in our area.

Did you know we are a part of one of the world's biggest reenactments? Every year, Christians participate in the reenactment of Jesus' birth at Christmas, and the reenactment of His resurrection at Easter. Did you ever notice how when we talk about Christmas, we talk about Jesus being born right now? "Silent Night" says "Christ the Savior is born" – not, "was born." This is not some kind of a grammatical boo boo. It's a vivid and emotion-filled reenactment of one of the world's two biggest news stories – evergreen news, which the world needs to receive every year.

And Christmas reminds us of the reason why God has given us four Gospels. Two of them begin with stories of Jesus' birth – different but compatible stories; our spiritual life would be so much poorer if either one were missing. Another (John) begins with a magnificent praise poem to Jesus, a poem which brings out the unity of Jesus with God the Father; then it launches into the story of John the Baptist. And the remaining Gospel – Mark, the "immediately" Gospel – launches straight into the story of John the Baptist.

As a prophet, John the Baptist knew in his bones that he was very honored to be sent as a messenger ahead of the Son of God. But do you realize how privileged we are to be born into the world AFTER Jesus? Just as John the Baptist said in the Gospel of Mark, "Someone more powerful than I will come after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of His sandals." Likewise, we today can say, "Someone more powerful than we are has come before us, and he has called us His friends if we keep His commandments" (John 15:14).

Joy

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 15

Mr. Frank Newton
Catalog Librarian,
Dover Library

Psalms 119: 49-72
Isaiah 9:8-17
2 Peter 2:1-19a
Mark 1:1-8

Joy

THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 16

Ms. Karen Doucette
Student
School of Divinity

Psalms 50
Isaiah 9:18-10:4
2 Peter 2:10b-16
Matthew 3:1-12

In the book, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Howard Clinebell speaks about Liberation. He suggests that "liberation is 'from' and liberation is 'to' and liberation is 'for.' It is for life in the Spirit expressed in loving service." Recently, I was awakened around 3:00 a.m. and reminded of an occurrence that happened that day. Immediately, attention was brought to my sin, and I began to discuss it through prayer. My heart was stricken with pain but brought to a place of peace through God's grace once the honest speech, plan, and path to forgiveness was discussed. In Matthew 3:11 John the Baptist explains, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry His sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John is speaking about the move "from," "to," and "for" as he announces for us to "prepare the way of the Lord."

Several years ago while living outside Boston, I was asked by a neighbor to collect her mail as she traveled and to leave it inside her front door. One day after dropping off the mail, I decided to go upstairs to look at her curtains. Still being new to the community and having no curtains, I headed up the stairs to gander at her beautifully decorated house. Upon her return, she came to my house to discuss her vacation. While chatting, I began having a vertical conversation and was told to – "be sure and tell her you went upstairs without permission." As I was talking with her, I was

arguing with God and said, "No way! She will never know. What's the big deal?" I continued like this back and forth before I finally said, "While you were away, I went upstairs and looked around your house, especially your curtains. I did so without your permission." I was mortified over this small confession, and she had no idea what to say to this southerner.

Shortly thereafter she came to speak with me about her troubled marriage. She was completely open and we became friends during the time I lived there. I learned from this situation that working through the pain of sin as authentic talk leads to unexpected surprises which lead to more intimate relationships.

John the Baptist tells us of our need to repent and to share the Good News of the coming of Christ and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. When we reach a place of liberation, the mystery of trust in Christ is made evident; God nurtures us as we move "from," "to," and "for" service as we are led by Jesus to a more fulfilling Holy friendship with Him. We are thankful that God sent John the Baptist to prepare our hearts and minds for the Lord's joyous coming. Remember this Advent season that whether it is small or large, it can lead to something eternal as Jesus receives our honest confessions and turns them into opportunities to reveal His glory.

When I was a little girl, my favorite Christmas decoration was our nativity set. Each year, when it was time to decorate the house, I made sure I was the one who set up the nativity scene. I would carefully pull out each porcelain piece and unwrap it. Because the figurines lay in their box for an entire year, they were always dusty and needed some attention. I took great pride in cleaning each one and setting it in its particular place. There was a stable, some animals, and all of the typical characters. There was baby Jesus, Joseph, Mary, a shepherd or two, and of course, the three wise men with their gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The nativity scene paints a powerful picture for us if we take the time to look and ponder it carefully. God chose to come down to earth and live. More than that, God came to show us how to live. God came to save us from ourselves. Jesus was born in a lowly manger, but He did so to make sure that "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matthew 11:5 NRSV) This is the evidence Jesus, himself, sends to John the Baptist when asked by a messenger, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (11:3)

Jesus was "the one" and is no longer here with us, but He waits with His Heavenly Father to return to us and reclaim the earth. This season of Advent is a time of waiting and expectation. While we wait for

Jesus, we must also remember to be Jesus on earth. We, as Christians, should be a living nativity scene, an enacted nativity, for everyone around us. When the homeless man on the street asks, "Are you going to give me food, or am I to wait for another?" How do we respond?

As a joyful, living nativity we should help the blind to see, the lame to walk, and the deaf to hear. I fear that we are dusty, however, and only brush ourselves off once a year at Christmas.

Go. Have Joy. Live out the Nativity.

Joy

FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 17

Ms. Jessica Godfrey
Student
School of Divinity

Psalm 40
Isaiah 10:5-19
2 Peter 2:17-22
Matthew 11:2-15

Joy

SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 18

Mrs. Jennifer Buckner
Director of Writing Center and
Learning Assistance Program
Department of English
Language and Literature

Psalm 55
Isaiah 10:20-27
Jude 17-25
Luke 3:16-21

"When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted." Psalm 138:3

Emma, my six-year-old daughter, read me a message from her Dove chocolate wrapper last week, "Blessings come to those who notice." So often, I adorn myself in stress in some feigned attempt to control that which I cannot. Meanwhile joy blossoms in unscripted giggles.

Apparently, I'm in a season of life that is busy. I live most days in an illusion there's another side to this season where I will breathe easier, listen to birds, and read fiction. Honestly, if I had that kind of time, I would fill it. I'm a person who thrives on multitasking. Workdays are micro-managed and planned from 5:30 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. meeting family, career, and scholarship needs. Many a Monday has begun with me wondering, "How am I going to get it all finished?"

Then I am reminded of an early morning conversation with Ron Williams outside of Broad River Coffee Company. Groggy and drooping, I talked about my status with coursework at Old Dominion University. He asked me, "How do you eat an elephant?" I smiled and shrugged. Ron said, "one bite at a time." This metaphor has guided my approach to many an overwhelming to-do list. I inevitably find myself at the end of a trial looking back in pride (and exhaustion) at a journey completed one bite at a time. Thank you, Ron.

I've always imagined joy as moments of monumental greatness, being hooded with my Ph.D. robes, watching my daughters graduate, or completing my first triathlon with my husband. These are accomplishments that require planning, training, and perseverance – all qualities I can control. What I find, however, is that joy perks in the in betweens. Joy happens on Saturday mornings when my girls practice cartwheels in dewy grass while Danny and I sip coffee in rocking chairs.

A month ago Craig, our pastor, issued each congregation member a rose symbolizing one mountain currently in our horizon. He asked us to dedicate ourselves to climbing this mountain through prayer and patience. My mountain is finding balance and perspective while juggling multiple roles (faculty member, wife, mother, Ph.D. student). Some days, I feel like my mountain casts a shadow on everything in my landscape. In order to cast a shadow, however, a light must come from behind a mountaintop. Instead, I am reminded that my light, my God, shines with me on my mountaintop, casting shadows away from my trials.

I pray that in this season of Advent we may all keep agendas in perspective and turn a few cartwheels in dewy grass.

There are certain times in a person's life when the depth of God's love is especially clear and profound. One of those times for me was the birth of my first child. As I held my daughter for the first time, a swell of emotions and convictions washed over me. Gently touching her tiny fingers stirred in me remarkable wonder and joy. Touching her silk-like cheek against mine gave me great pride and assurance. Feeling the weight of her snuggling body in my arms prompted me to give my best for her. Even though I had just met this person and we were mere strangers, I knew immediately I loved her. I knew I loved her fully and unconditionally. I knew she was my precious child.

Also, at that same moment I felt such intense love towards my newborn daughter, the Light shined especially brilliant in my soul. If I could love my own child that much, then how much more does God love me? Great was and is my love for my children; and yet, that love pales in comparison to God's love. Infinitely greater and deeper is God's love for each of us and all of us.

The Season of Advent leads us back to a stable and its manger where God's love became incarnate in Jesus Christ. The baby grew and matured. The boy became a man. The man taught and worked miracles. He preached and proclaimed God's kingdom come. He suffered and died and rose on the third day. How much does God love us? God loves us so much that he gave his only Son. The life

of Jesus Christ was poured out and laid down for us and for the whole world. That is love, full and unconditional. God gave his Son "that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).

As we walk towards Bethlehem this Advent Season, we prepare for and anticipate the coming of Christ into the world and into our lives. God makes provision for us in Christ. He is ready to love us through Christ. In response, are we ready to be swept up in God's love? Are we ready to be held in God's loving arms? Are we ready to be taken by the hand and guided through life by God's wisdom and truth? As we walk through Advent, are we ready to be beloved children of God?

The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?
My God, no hymn for thee?
My soul's a shepherd too; a flock it feeds
Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.
George Herbert (The Temple, 194:1-4)

LOVE

SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 19

Dr. Scott Haggaman
Pastor, First Baptist Church,
Marion, NC
Doctor of Ministry 2005
School of Divinity

Psalms 24
Isaiah 42:1-12
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 3:16-21

LOVE

MONDAY,
DECEMBER 20

Dr. Gerald L. Keown
Bob Shepherd Chair of
Biblical Studies
Associate Dean
Professor of Old Testament
Interpretation
School of Divinity

Psalm 61
Isaiah 11:1-9
Revelation 20:1-10
John 5:30-47

The initial scripture selection for today is a psalm of lament. The psalmist cries out to God for help in time of trouble. Such psalms, the most numerous in the Psalter, are their own reminder of the abundance of God's love which is made available to those who choose to be God's people. Times of difficulty, challenge, or even great tragedy, do not leave the God-follower in isolation. The love of God offers an avenue to be used to channel the fears, the pains, the heartache, of a God-follower in distress. There is indeed refuge "under the shelter of your wings."

The familiar passage from Isaiah 11 offers the grand vision of hope to be focused upon an ideal king whom God will enthrone, a king endowed with the very spirit of the LORD. The qualities which make possible the very reign of God mark the reign of this promised king. In one of the more grandiose visions of scripture, which we read eagerly during each Advent season, there is the vision of a new paradise. Predator dwells in peace with prey. Children are safe from all harm. Pain and destruction are eliminated. The knowledge of the LORD fills the whole earth, meaning that everyone in this ideal vision "knows" the LORD, and enters into the relationship God has intended from the beginning of time.

John 5 reminds the reader that the promises unveiled in the three earlier passages all come to fruition in the person of Jesus. The love of God is

poured out on all of humankind in the Incarnated One who embodies that love. The vision moves from the ideal dream of Isaiah to the enfleshed reality who comes in the "Father's name."

As we look around at a world consumed by troubles of every imaginable kind, our tendency may be to wonder at the absence of evidence of God's love. What we see bears little resemblance to the grand hope of the gospel. Yet the Advent message is intended for just such circumstances. It comes in the middle of the dead season of winter, to lives challenged by the enormity of life's struggle, to offer the reassurance of God's love. We focus on the baby in a manger, knowing the baby matured into the most persuasive evidence of God's love ever experienced.

May the love of God surround you during this Advent season, reminding you that you are not alone.

Often I am asked to describe how Christmas is celebrated in my native country, Brazil. Besides the climate difference – there Santa wears swim suits, since it is hot summer – I have no recollection of it being unlike Christmas here – decorations (trees and the sort), special foods, and wonderful fellowship with family and friends. Oh yeah, under the tree there are gifts, and the challenge is to wait until Christmas Eve to unpack them. Little holes in the wrapping paper help, but nothing appeases the wonder of seeing whatever in full color or dimension. Like when I read Charles Dickens' novel in my teens, I could hardly wait to uncover the mystery and find out if on the inside there was "hope fulfilled" to match the "great expectations."

Of course, Christmas "is the season to be jolly" because indeed a much greater gift is always a possibility – peace on earth! The shalom of God comes to us far beyond anything that we can think or imagine. Zechariah, for instance, performed his priestly duties faithfully year after year. We can hear his repeated prayer, "Oh Lord, grant that Elizabeth and I will see the seed of our offspring so that we may rejoice in the land of the living." With the passing of time, as they became senior citizens, it did not make sense to pray so anymore. Lo and behold, in the context of phase one of the Christmas story, Zechariah goes into the temple to burn incense and was surprised by Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, who told him soon he would become a Dad and Elizabeth a Mom. When the

news sank in, it was more than the heart could bear – oh the Spirit of the LORD, the God Almighty, was so alive in them that even if Dad and Mom tried, they couldn't stop giggling!

The Psalmist and the prophet echo the response of gratitude. "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me" (Psalm 66:16 NRSV). When hope is fulfilled, one trades silence for shouting! For the prophet, the promise of deliverance is comforting. There will be a way out. The LORD will see to it that his people will let go of jealousy and hostility, and that united "Ephraim" and "Judah" will have energy and strength to win over the surrounding enemies (Isaiah 11:10-16).

You and I are no different. Down deep inside what keeps us going is the hope that one day things will not be the same. We eagerly wait for the magic words: all is well. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelations 21:4 NIV). Why not peep into this package of hope? Without disappointment, the gift of love will match all of our "great expectations." Isn't that what Christmas is all about?

LOVE

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21

Dr. Sophia Stiefel
Professor of Christian Education
School of Divinity

Psalm 66
Isaiah 11:10-16
Revelation 20:11-21:8
Luke 1:5-25

LOVE

WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 22

Ms. Nikki Raye Rice
Undergraduate Student
Creative Writing Major

Psalm 77
Isaiah 28:9-22
Revelation 21:9-21
Luke 1:26-38

Two summers ago I worked at a children's home in Lake Waccamaw, NC. As a chaplain intern, I built relationships with the residents and staff, served in the daily chapel functions, and created summer programs for the children. Despite full workdays, I still found that I had a lot of free time that I couldn't fill with Facebook, television, and texting. I delighted in the solitude and rest... but only for about a week.

The quiet brought introspection, and introspection forced me to acknowledge my wounds. It seemed that in this time that God had set aside for me to serve some of the most broken children in my state, he also set aside time for me to wrestle with the brokenness in my own life. I was struggling with every hurt and question I had always conveniently been too busy to acknowledge.

I lamented just as Asaph does in Psalm 77, not only for myself, but for the youth that told me their stories of abuse and rejection. I questioned where God was in all of this pain. My heart was breaking for those children and how bound they were in their troubles. But, I praise God that my laments and theirs did not fall on deaf ears, and that God showed me his love and faithfulness through something small and typically unnoticed: magnolia leaves.

One day as I walked to the lake right next to the children's home, I pulled a leaf off a low hanging magnolia tree. I rolled the stem of the leaf in my

fingers, flitting it in the wind. I sat down on the pier to gaze at the bronze water and I tore the leaf in half. The scent of pepper and citrus invaded my face. And as I relished in the beautiful aroma, I realized it was only in the breaking of this leaf that I could really smell what was inside.

St. Augustine in City of God says that when one shakes fetid water, it stinks, but that same shaking also makes perfume issue a more pleasant odor. The troubles of this world shake us all; the difference is that those of us following Christ have had the fetid water inside of us turned into perfume. That summer I learned that the gospel was not dependent on my eloquence, intellect, or ability to stay busy. But, that the gospel was most clearly communicated through my brokenness.

It seems to me that a messiah that steps through brokenness and death to bring me life could easily have the power to take my hardships and use them to bring others healing. If we submit to the love of God that is grafted into us through his son's life, death, and resurrection, I believe we will release a sweet aroma, even in times of trouble. Today, let's praise a God so glorious that he creates beauty out of our brokenness.

In the summer of 1951, I joined the United States Navy. After boot camp I was assigned to the Seabees: Mobile Construction Battalion #3, "mob three" to use sailor lingo. Our battalion was sent via a troop transport ship to a spot in the Philippines where we literally bull-dozed our way into primitive, dense jungle. That was the beginning of what was to become Cubi Point Naval Air Station, the largest U.S. naval air station in the Pacific. "It came to pass" two and one-half years later that for hundreds of us, our tour of duty was over. We boarded another troop transport ship and headed for the states, specifically San Francisco and the U.S. Naval station at Treasure Island. Hundreds of thousands of sailors are familiar with Treasure Island.

It is interesting how things change with time. For example, the Cubi Point Naval Air Station no longer belongs to our government. It now belongs to the Filipino government. Also, Navy operations at the Treasure Island Naval Base ended in 1997. The property has since been used for varied purposes and now belongs to the City and County of San Francisco.

After many days at sea, our ship anchored near the coast of California after dark one night. We were told that we were very near San Francisco and that we would go into port the first thing the next morning. The air was thick with eager excitement and anticipation as we waited for the light of morning. Before dawn, the ship began to move and we knew we had to be close. Almost everybody was

on deck; there was hardly a square inch of vacant space! The early morning light broke through and the first sight we saw was the Golden Gate Bridge. The air was filled with cheers and sailor hats flung upward. There was unbridled happiness. The light had revealed a wondrous thing!!

We went ashore at Treasure Island Naval Base.

Just to keep us mindful that we were still in Uncle Sam's Navy, we were required to stand inspection the next morning. In preparation for this we – among other things – worked on our shoes. We had to look sharp and shoes had to be shined to the point where you could almost see your reflection in them. Yes, we Seabees were thrilled at what we knew was to come.

As Christians we are thankful for the One who has come and we are moved considerably by the anticipation of Christ's second coming. Our Seabee joy was not fully realized until the light appeared. But as wonderful as that light was, as Christians we know that the "true light" is Jesus Christ, whose return we await. We Seabees shined our shoes to the point of perfection...and reflection. During this Advent Season, could there be any worthier goal for us than to live a life that reflects the "light of the world" and God's immeasurable love, truly a love that will not let us go.

LOVE

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23

Dr. Rance Henderson
Chairperson
Gardner-Webb University
Board of Trustees

Psalms 80
Isaiah 29:13-24
Revelation 21:22-22:5
Luke 1:39-48a (48b-50)

LOVE

FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 24

Dr. Robert Canoy
Dean and Professor of
Theology
School of Divinity

Psalms 45
Isaiah 35:1-10
Revelation 22:1-21
Luke 1:67-80

Beginning with the end is really the very best place to start! You may remember the “Do, Re, Mi” lyric in Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein’s classic *The Sound of Music*. When Julie Andrews (Maria) is helping the children do something that Captain Von Trapp had forbidden them to do since their mother’s death – Sing – she reminds the children that to “start at the very beginning is a very good place to start.” And Jesus and John think so too!

Christmas is a great time both for beginning and for beginning again. In many ways today’s biblical lesson from Revelation, although it is found virtually at the end of the Bible, really starts at the very beginning. We are reminded that while the “revelation of Jesus Christ which God...signified...to his servant John” (Revelations 1:1-2) focuses on the end, this final book of the Bible has always contained the true meaning of Christmas – the revelation of Jesus Christ. Case in point, Revelation 22:7 reminds us again of Jesus’ words: “I am coming soon” (although I prefer to translate the Greek word *taxei* here as “quickly” or “suddenly,” much like what we think of when we are hailing a “taxi”). That is, Jesus is about to be revealed to us again, suddenly, and we will be “blessed” if we are those who “wash their robes” (v.14). Certainly, then, Christmas is the time of new beginnings, a time for starting over and beginning again fresh and clean.

In fact, as the Book of Revelation moves ever closer to its end, and after we have literally gasped at all of the powerful (and sometimes horrible) images found throughout Revelation, images that describe in graphic detail the sorry condition of the world when we abandon God for evil’s beastly

counterfeits, Revelation closes with the hope-filled promise of the Lord’s coming. “I am coming quickly,” Jesus repeats himself again in 22:20. What better news could there be than that? (Our answer, I suppose, depends upon our readiness.)

So, the closing chapter of the Bible directs us to look ahead to the end, and to begin living our lives again (or for the first time) from the vantage point of the end! We are even encouraged to cry longingly with all of our Christian brothers and sisters, “Come, Lord Jesus” (v. 20b). Let us make no mistake: this is no mere selfish cry for escape from today’s troubles. Some years ago a friend convinced me to go on a 10K run with him. I knew it was a mistake to accept his offer – since I hadn’t been training for such a run. I did pretty well the first couple of miles until we began ascending a steep hill. He still chuckles at hearing me cry, “Even so come, Lord Jesus!”

No, Jesus never encourages us to cry selfishly for His return, but rather to cry for His justice, peace, love, harmony, and hope to become reality in the whole world. And since Jesus is the Prince of Peace who has come for the peace of the whole world, we can never forget that the beginning of the end has begun with Him. Or, to put it like Revelation 22:13 does: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Which means that the same Jesus who came, whose birth we celebrate tomorrow, is the very One who is coming – and soon – quickly!

Let then our hearts and lives be truly prepared for His arrival, because He is coming!

The discussion in my Sunday School class recently touched on serious and even dangerous conflicts between religions on a global scale, particularly in light of recent events in the news. After the discussion, during our time of praise and prayer, one of our class members spoke movingly of a wonderful act of kindness by another person during a time of need for our class member. Were these two vastly different topics unrelated? I think not.

Psalms 2 seems to warn about conflict of the kind we discussed in Sunday School and asks, "Why do the nations conspire, and the people plot in vain?" The Psalmist warns kings and rulers to "be wise" and to "serve the Lord," for if they fail to do so, "he will be angry, and you will perish in the way." In a column entitled, "Letter to Muslim world: Let's agree not to tolerate any hatred," a national columnist, Kathleen Parker, sounds a comparable warning: "Anyone who believes in God can't also believe that his divine plan included his creation's mutual destruction." Speaking about the same religious conflict, a Christian pastor was quoted by a newspaper as saying, "We're supposed to be peacemakers. We're supposed to love everybody." The common point of the pastor and the columnist – love, rather than hatred.

God is the origin and the source of love. The ultimate expression of his love is the sending of his Son to be born in a manger, to live among us and to die on the cross for our sins, so that through him

we may have eternal life. We are, then, to love one another: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7).

I am not so naïve as to simplify global conflicts, but I do believe that "kings and rulers" are foolish to believe that peace can be found unless love is the foundation of all such efforts. And that foundation of love must begin with each of us, as we must "love one another." And so, the act of love toward a member of our Sunday School class was not so far removed from the earlier discussion after all.

LOVE

SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 25

Dr. Frank Bonner
President

Psalms 2
Zechariah 2:10-13
1 John 4:7-18
John 1:1-14

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be from a notebook or a set of legal pads. The lighting is even, and there are no markings or text on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or printed text on the page.

Gardner-Webb University At-a-Glance

- ◆ Gardner-Webb is a private, Baptist-related university located in the Piedmont region of North Carolina.
- ◆ We serve over 4,300 students from over 39 states and 25 countries.
- ◆ Gardner-Webb University has been ranked as one of the "Best Universities" in the South that offer a "full range of undergraduate and master's programs" in "America's Best Colleges" from U.S. News & World Report.
- ◆ Gardner-Webb University has been named to the annual report on America's 100 Best College Buys, designating them as one of America's best college educations for the cost.
- ◆ Gardner-Webb was one of only 528 universities and colleges nation-wide to be named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll (for the third consecutive year).
- ◆ A total of 5 professional schools and 9 academic schools offer nearly 60 undergraduate and graduate major fields of study.
- ◆ Our 140+ full-time faculty (13:1 student-to-faculty ratio) are teacher-scholars who help foster meaningful dialogue, critical analysis, and spiritual challenge within a diverse community of learning.
- ◆ Gardner-Webb University is a NCAA Division I institution and competes in the Big South Conference and the Coastal Collegiate Swimming Association.
- ◆ Gardner-Webb features active chapters of at least 10 national honor societies in such academic disciplines as Biology, Spanish, English, French, Psychology, Religious Studies and Theology, and Nursing.

Gardner-Webb University

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